

## INTERNATIONAL GEOMORPHOLOGY IN BOLOGNA

The fourth quadriannual conference of the International Association of Geomorphologists was held in Bologna, Italy, 28 August–3 September 1997. The next conference will be in Japan in 2001. By head count, this was the largest of the IAG meetings; an announcement at the closing ceremony put the attendance figure at 969. Delegates from about 70 countries attended the plenary lectures, the general paper and poster sessions, and the 28th Binghamton Symposium. It is always difficult to schedule a large number of papers in several days. The format used at Bologna allowed oral presentation of only the chair's summary and two or three selected papers. The rest were put up for short periods as posters in tented enclosures.

IAG has come a long way since the very successful first meeting in Manchester in 1985. It has organized a number of international and regional meetings, a collection of national delegates, a constitution, and a newsletter. It is run by an elective executive committee which changes every four years. Its successful physical growth makes it appropriate to raise a few questions. How successful has IAG been in promoting research and education in geomorphology? What is the significant outcome of conferences such as the one in Bologna? In general, what has the science of geomorphology gained from these developments?

The answers to these questions lie beyond simple numerical totalling of the conference attendees, the number of papers presented, and the number of publications that come out of these meetings. Such figures are already impressive. However, one wants to know how international this association of geomorphologists has become; how instrumental it is in diffusing quality research proceedings; and whether those who attended Bologna gained professionally from the act of being present. Will Bologna be remembered as an important event in the history of geomorphology?

The success of a conference is displayed not only in the number of participants delivering papers but also in the quality of such papers. IAG conferences certainly have achieved the first measure of success, the number of participants. Did we, however, come to Bologna expecting the best crop of papers for the previous four years? The lure of the IAG, which is a rather young organization, is still not that strong although time is on its side. It is interesting that three of the more successful sessions in Bologna (geomorphology and global tectonics, magnitude and frequency in geomorphology, and the 28th Binghamton symposium) evolved out of long-term preparation time.

The presentation format in Bologna (restricted number of oral presentations and widespread poster displays) did not help much in diffusing research information. If almost every paper is to be a poster, then these need to be displayed for a long period of time and in spacious circumstances so that the delegates can appreciate them. In Bologna, posters which were not mainstream usually stood in splendid isolation whereas those covering popular topics were too crowded for reading the text without being jostled. Such arrangements effectively discourage good contribution.

Uncertainty in publication plans also hinders quality contribution. Speedy publication of conference papers is a very attractive proposition. Would it be possible for the IAG to break from the tradition and arrange conference-synchronous publication of the papers for at least several sessions? This is an increasingly popular format and ensures high-quality papers and a more professional feel to the conference.

Bologna will probably be best remembered for promoting theory and application of geomorphology, thereby reflecting current trends. However, by the time the publications are out, we will have been to new conferences with fresh papers, and, given the environment of Bologna, we will probably remember it more for the urban ambience. Senior executives of the IAG have in the past often expressed a desire to see whole shelves of IAG publications in libraries. This has been achieved by other organizations. Given a more decentralized planning for publication, this should also come the way of the IAG.

That brings us back to the questions raised earlier. After Bologna, the IAG proletariat continues to be international, but not the executive committee. Co-opting members from the far-flung corners of the globe is not

a very attractive balancing proposition. Perhaps the IAG should, like many other academic institutions, take its elections more formally. This would mean collecting nominations several months before the election date and publishing brief biographical sketches of the candidates (including their past service to the IAG) in the newsletter. It would keep the people jostling round the posters informed as to who are willing to take on the jobs. It will be a supremely better arrangement than the present system of last-minute persuasion of people to be office-bearers. IAG now is too large an organization for that.

It is doubtful whether Bologna will be remembered as a dramatic event in the history of geomorphology. We probably will not look back after years and identify the beginning of a style, a thought, a technique out of this conference. Bologna was more of a continuation; an opportunity for stock-taking, for a meeting of people with shared interests, and for personal forging of new research association, and, of course, for making IAG a more durable organization. That was the contribution to international geomorphology in Bologna.

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